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THANKSGIVING SERMON

By the Rev. E. A. White, Rector of
Christ Church.

"Provide things honest in the sight of all men."—Romans 12: 17.
We are gathered here this morning in response to the call of the civil authority. We who are churchmen would doubtless keep a day of Thanksgiving even though the civil authority did not appoint such a day, for there is a Thanksgiving service in our Prayer Book and a day there designated for its use—provided no other day is set apart by the civil authority for that purpose. This Thanksgiving Day service is the one and only service of the Prayer Book that is distinctly American. All else therein is bequeathed to us as a precious legacy by our mother Church.

It was a New England custom, this Thanksgiving Day of ours, and stamped by our forefathers upon the very first page of New England history, and as we read that history we find them ever distinguished for their energy, honesty, and domestic concord. They lie to-day sleeping either among their own austere Northern hills or on the bleak and rock-bound coast, beneath the shadow of the white clapboard meeting-house, and too often, I fear, we shall look in vain for their successors. Among them were men whom a New England writer aptly calls "the sturdy kings of homespun," who climbed among the hills with their axes to cut away room for their cabins, for family prayers, and for the good future to come. Among them were some who foddered their cattle on the snows, and built stone fences, while the corn was sprouting in the hills. Among them too were mothers who made the clothes for their children's bodies and lined their memories with the Westminster Catechism. Among them too were the millers and carpenters, the district committees and the school-mistresses who "boarded around" in the families of their scholars; the roasters and the deacons—men who loved God, their country, and their homes. These were the men that made New England, and that have sent forth their descendants throughout the length and breadth of this land, to lay its foundations and open up the avenues of its future prosperity. It is the descendants of these rugged but honest New Englanders who to-day, says a retired merchant who has carefully investigated the matter, form over ninety per cent. of the successful business men of New York city.

Those of you who have ever lived in New England will never forget those New England homes. You remember the simplicity, the drudgery—if you wish to call it such—but you also remember that with it all there was health and virtue and integrity. Facing all weather, cold and hot, wet and dry, following the plough on the stony hill-side, digging out the stones with hard lifting and persistent prying, husking the corn in the cold November winds, dragging home in the deep snow the great wood-pile for the winter's consumption they knew no mental lassitude and no discontent.

And the mothers of those days—they spent their nervous impulse through their muscles, and had no need of calming the unspent lightning with doses of valarian or some other anodyne. But best of all, around all this simple life there was a closely girded habit of economy. Young and old, male and female, from the boy that rode the plough-horse between the rows of corn to the grandmother sitting in the chimney corner and knitting the winter's supply of stockings—they had no notion of squandering lightly what they earned so hardily. And yet they had their day's amusement, as some of us may well remember. And the one day of the whole year that was especially set apart as a day of gladness and good cheer was Thanksgiving Day. The young, yes, and the old as well, reckoned from Thanksgiving to Thanksgiving. It was the day of family reunion. Whole families would travel for hours, unmindful of cold or storm, that they might gather around the Thanksgiving table in the old homestead. Who that has ever seen an old-fashioned New England home on Thanksgiving Day can ever forget it? The table loaded down with all the good things from garden and field and forest, and cooked, as some of us often think, as only our mothers knew how to cook them; the family circle, from the white-haired patriarch sitting in his old armchair before the great fire-place

with its blazing logs, furnishing the light as well as the heat, to the great-grandchild sitting on his knee and listening to the old man's tales of when the Indians lived in the neighboring woods; the games that were played by the youth while their elders were relating to each other the events that had happened to each since last Thanksgiving Day. Then the old family Bible brought reverently to be read before they separated for the night, the hymn sung to the tune "Coronation," or "Duke Street," or "Old Warwick," and finally the simple, homely prayer. It was thus those old New England ancestors of ours kept their Thanksgiving Days.

But were we bidden to some such homely festivity to-day, how tasteless and wearisome it might possibly seem. And yet "these things," as one has said, "were the expressions of the social and domestic life of a people who lived within their means, who neither ate nor drank nor wore what they did not need for, whose life was no miserable struggle to escape from their creditors, but who feared God, obeyed the law, and bred in their children the same virtues."

You may tell me that they were narrow-minded and intolerant, that they had cruel ideas about God and the unpardonable quality of sin; yes, there were some sins that they did not find hard to forgive, sins against home and the family, sins against truth, and common honesty between man and man—for such sins they had neither mercy nor forgiveness. But they paid their debts and provided things honest in the sight of men. What though it was rugged, that old New England life of ours, it was at least true, honest, and health-giving, both morally and physically. But whatever may have been its characteristics, it was very different from the life of to-day. Truly has it been said that "no nation has ever known so radical a revolution in its social and domestic habits in so short a time as has the American people."

Take the last fifty years' and notice the wonderful growth in the nation's wealth and population; look at the wave of immigration that has swept like a tidal wave over our country, at the wonderful discoveries of gold and silver and iron and coal, of petroleum and natural gas, at the multiplication of our manufacturing industries, and the marvelous growth in facilities of intercourse with other nations. We point with a pride that is indeed most pardonable to the wonderful growth of our country, but as the soil which grows the richest grain can also grow the rankest weeds, so remember that while material prosperity takes root and grows with astonishing rapidity here in America, so is there no people in whom the extravagances and vices of every nation take root and grow more rapidly than the American people.

Do not misunderstand me, and think I am a gloomy pessimist prophesying only evil for our nation and deeming that all of virtue was held by the days that are gone. Far from it. I yield to none in my love for my native land; I believe in her future glory and prosperity, and that she will eventually prove true to those Heaven-born principles upon which, like foundation stones, the nation has been built; but at the same time it would be folly to blind our eyes to certain evils that exist in our home lives, and which in the last fifty years have more than kept pace with its wonderful advance in material prosperity.

Look at the love of display, the craving for luxuries, the desire to live as our neighbors live, the growing tendency to sink truth, honesty, and integrity in the maddening greed for gain, the impurity of our social life, the looseness which in some parts of our land has made marriage almost a mockery. These are tendencies and desires concerning which I do not believe there can be any dispute nor any serious question. Explain it all as you will; say if you choose that the moral severeness of the fathers has provided the luxury of the children, or that it is the passing excess of our national childhood, or that our increased facilities of intercourse with other nations have placed greater luxury and greater temptations within easy reach of a greater number. Explain it as you will, the fact remains that to-day, as a nation, our habits are less simple, our desires for luxuries greater, our regard for truth weaker, and our social life more corrupt, and our home-life less pure and true. If there was no ulterior result produced by these things, if they only stood for just what they appear to be, bad as they are, then might you say to me that it was not necessary to publicly call your attention to them; but alas! they mean far more than that; they are merely indicated upon the surface, for "whatever may be said in favor of profuseness and luxury, it will not be denied that luxury is enervating"; and the history of every nation that has gone before us tells us that it is luxury that has paved the way for national dishonor. And it means even more than this. It means, as one has said, "the growth of a relaxed sense of that individual honor and common honesty for which our fathers were noted"; it means a disposition that will have luxuries by paying for them if it can, perhaps, but which will have them anyway, even though trusts be betrayed and creditors be defrauded.

Almost daily is recorded some tragedy

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of horror, in which some poor wretch, "daring to face his Maker rather than his creditors, jumps from the dock or blows out his brains," and the usual verdict is given of "suicide occasioned by financial difficulties." Yes, financial difficulties produced by extravagant living and chronic debt, by craving what he could not pay for, and by spending what he had not earned.

A well-known physician in one of our larger cities said not long ago: "It is not overwork that is killing the American people, neither the people who work with their brains, nor those who work with their hands. I see a great many broken-down men and broken-down women. I am called to treat scores of people with shattered brains and shattered nerves, but they are not the fruits of overwork. The most fruitful sources of physical derangement and mental and nervous disorders in America are pecuniary embarrassments and family dissensions." This being true, where shall we look for a corrective? I give the answer which all history as well as the Gospel gives, in the purity of the household, for that is the seat of our civilization. The only lasting influence which can preserve or heal the social body is one that works from the root. What, then, the form of our civilization, it must depend on the tone of our household life for its healthy growth. All the gems of personal character—truth, purity, honesty, reverence of law—must be implanted in this soil. The State rests on it, the Church rests on it, and its teaching is sadly weakened if it be not supported by home nurture.

And this is what, in their sturdy simplicity, their honest dealings, the plainness but pureness of their homes, our fathers taught us. They cherished the home life. They nursed the virtues of the household, they hallowed marriage, they taught honesty, contentment, industry, frugality, and charity to the poor. And as we remember to-day how much we owe to them, let us resolve that we will not prove false to a heritage so true. Let us resolve to follow their example and keep inviolate the household law, remembering that the life of every nation keeps pace with the purity of the family; and, remembering also, that the virtue that to-day upholds our Republic, we owe to those fathers of ours who, with all their silt theology, paid their debts, were honest in their dealings with their fellow men, and kept the household life as a moss-rose in its envelope and bestowed it to us, their children. Let us guard it as a precious heritage.

And as we gather around the family table to-day let us not forget those who are less fortunate than we are, but try so far as we may be able to bring the sunshine of Thanksgiving Day to their hearts, no matter what November gloom may reign without.

And as we grasp the hand and look into the eyes of friend and kinsman, be this the greeting that we give: "Brother, whatever else our homes provide to-day, of plenty and good cheer, let us provide things honest in the sight of all men."

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